Shema Yisrael Programme – Beshallach 5774

**Can Jews believe in Astrology?**

Astrology is one of the earliest attempts made by man to find the order hidden behind or within the confusing and apparent chaos that exists in the world.

**– Karen Hamaker-Zondag**

Superstition is to religion what astrology is to astronomy the mad daughter of a wise mother. These daughters have too long dominated the earth.

**– Voltaire**

I don't believe in astrology; I'm a Sagittarius and we're sceptical.

**– Arthur C. Clarke**

If one were to bring ten of the wisest men in the world together and ask them what was the most stupid thing in existence, they would not be able to discover anything so stupid as astrology.

**– David Hilbert**

About astrology and palmistry: they are good because they make people vivid and full of possibilities. They are communism at its best. Everybody has a birthday and almost everybody has a palm.

**– Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.**

Who needs astrology? The wise man gets by on fortune cookies.

**– Edward Abbey**

The only function of economic forecasting is to make astrology look respectable.

**– John Kenneth Galbraith**

*Responsibility*, n. A detachable burden easily shifted to the shoulders of God, Fate, Fortune, Luck or one's neighbor. In the days of astrology it was customary to unload it upon a star.

**– Ambrose Bierce**

A wise man shall overrule his stars, and have a greater influence upon his own content than all the constellations and planets of the firmament.

**– Jeremy Taylor**

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.

**– William Shakespeare**

Questions to ponder...

Why do people want to know the future?

Why do people believe in horoscopes?

Is there such a thing as fate?

Are there forces in the world that can predict the future, such as tarot cards? If so, what are these forces? Where do they come from?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קנו עמוד א - ב

האי מאן דבמאדים יהי גבר אשיד דמא. אמר רבי אשי: אי אומנא, אי גנבא, אי טבחא, אי מוהלא. אמר רבה: אנא במאדים הואי! - אמר אביי מר נמי עניש וקטיל. איתמר, רבי חנינא אומר: מזל מחכים, מזל מעשיר, ויש מזל לישראל. רבי יוחנן אמר: אין מזל לישראל ... ואף רב סבר אין מזל לישראל, דאמר רב יהודה אמר רב: מניין שאין מזל לישראל - שנאמר (בראשית טו) ויוצא אתו החוצה. אמר אברהם לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם (בראשית טו) בן ביתי יורש אתי. אמר לו: לאו, (בראשית טו) כי אם אשר יצא ממעיך. אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, נסתכלתי באיצטגנינות שלי ואיני ראוי להוליד בן. אמר ליה: צא מאיצטגנינות שלך, שאין מזל לישראל. מאי דעתיך - דקאי צדק במערב, מהדרנא ומוקמינא ליה במזרח. והיינו דכתיב (ישעיהו מא) מי העיר ממזרח צדק יקראהו לרגלו.

Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 156a-b

Someone who is born during the time of Mars will be a spiller of blood. Rav Ashi said: ‘He may be a bloodletter or a thief (murderer) or a *shochet* or a *mohel*’. Rabbah sid: ‘I was born under the influence of Mars and I am not a spiller of blood!’ Abaye said back to him [Rabbah]: ‘The master has also punished and killed.’

It was stated: *Mazal* determines intelligence, *Mazal* determines wealth and the celestial signs hold sway even over the Jewish people (i.e. no one can escape their fate). Rebbi Yochanan says: ‘The celestial signs do not hold any sway over the Jewish people (for prayer and personal merits can prevail over their prescribed fate). ... And Rav also holds that the celestial bodies hold no sway of the Jewish people, for Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: ‘From where do we know that the celestial bodies hold no sway of the Jewish people? As it says (Genesis 15:5) ‘And He took him outside, [and He said, "Please look heavenward and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So will be your seed.]"

Abraham said before the Holy One Blessed is He: ‘Master of the Universe, (*ibid.* 3) “my steward (Ishmael) inherits me...” The holy One said back to him, ‘No, (*ibid.* 4) “only he that shall come forth from within you shall inherit you.”’ Abraham then said before Him: ‘Master of the Universe! I have already consulted my astrology, and it seems that I am not fit to bear a son [with Sarah]!’ The Holy One said to him, ‘Go outside of your astrology, for the celestial signs hold no sway over Israel. What do you suppose? That Jupiter (under whom you were born) is in the west [and you are therefore infertile]? I will simply move it around and situate it in the east.’ This is the meaning of that which is written (Isaiah 41:2) “Who awoke *Tzedek* [Jupiter] from the east; He summoned it because of him [Abraham].”

In the same Gemara, Rebbi Akiva who had stated his opinion that there is no planetary influence upon the Jewish people was told by non-Jewish astrologers that his daughter was in danger of being bitten by a snake on her wedding day and dying. Rebbi Akiva was very worried. On her wedding night, she removed her brooch and fixed it to the wall. In the morning, she removed it to find that as she pinned it to the wall the previous night, the pin had pierced the head of a snake, killing it. Rebbi Akiva asked her what she had done the previous day. She explained that a pauper had called from the doorway during the wedding and no one had noticed, so she had stood up and gave him some of her food. Rebbi Akiva proclaimed that this act of charity had saved her from death.

ויקרא פרק יט

(לא) אַל תִּפְנוּ אֶל הָאֹבֹת וְאֶל הַיִּדְּעֹנִים אַל תְּבַקְשׁוּ לְטָמְאָה בָהֶם אֲנִי יְקֹוָק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Leviticus 19:31

You shall not turn to [the sorcery of] Ov or Yid'oni; you shall not seek [these and thereby] defile yourselves through them. I am the Lord, your God.

ויקרא פרק יט

(כו) לֹא תֹאכְלוּ עַל הַדָּם לֹא תְנַחֲשׁוּ וְלֹא תְעוֹנֵנוּ:

Leviticus 19:26

You shall not eat over the blood. You shall not act on the basis of omens or lucky hours.

רש"י ויקרא פרק יט פסוק כו

לא תנחשו - כגון אלו המנחשין בחולדה ובעופות, פתו נפלה מפיו, צבי הפסיקו בדרך: ולא תעוננו - לשון עונות ושעות, שאומר יום פלוני יפה להתחיל מלאכה, שעה פלונית קשה לצאת:

Rashi on Leviticus 19:26

**You shall not act on the basis of omens:** like those who interpret [the sounds or actions of] a weasel or birds as omens [for good or bad], - [Torat Kohanim 19:71; Sanhhedrin 66a], or [like those who interpret] bread falling from his mouth or a deer crossing his path [as signs for certain things]. **You shall not act on the basis of… lucky hours:** [The expression תְעוֹנְנוּ] denotes times (עוֹנוֹת) and hours, that one would say, “Such and such a day is auspicious to begin your work,” or, “Such and such an hour is unlucky to embark [on a journey].”

The Geonim held that one may not view astrology as fatalistic. It may be true that astrology gives a person a certain inclination, each person has the ability to overcome that tendency.

שולחן ערוך יורה דעה סימן קעט סעיף א

א] אין שואלים בחוזים בכוכבים ולא בגורלות. הגה: ב] משום שנאמר: תמים תהיה עם ה' אלהיך (דברים יח, יג) (ב"י בשם תוספות דע"פ ובשם ספרי). א ג] וכ"ש (א) דאסור לשאול (ב) בקוסמים ומנחשים ומכשפים (פסקי מהרא"י סי' צ"ו).

Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 179:1

One should not ask astrologers and not cast lots. Gloss: for it says (Deuteronomy 18:13) “You should be wholehearted with Hashem your God”. All the more so, it is forbidden to consult with sorcerers, fortune tellers or wizards.

דברים פרק יח פסוק יג

תָּמִים תִּהְיֶה עִם יְקֹוָק אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

Deuteronomy 18:13

Be wholehearted with the Lord, your God.

רש"י דברים פרק יח פסוק יג

(יג) תמים תהיה עם ה' אלהיך - התהלך עמו בתמימות ותצפה לו ולא תחקור אחר העתידות, אלא כל מה שיבא עליך קבל בתמימות ואז תהיה עמו ולחלקו:

Rashi on Deuteronomy 18:13

**Be wholehearted with the Lord, your God:** Conduct yourself with Him with simplicity and depend on Him, and do not inquire of the future; rather, accept whatever happens to you with [unadulterated] simplicity and then, you will be with Him and to His portion.

**Vilna Gaon – his lottery**

From birth to the grave, decisions are our destiny. That is why they are so terrifying. Since time immemorial, man has searched so avidly for ways to avoid the terror of decision- making that the Torah devotes a special *parsha* warning us against divining the future. *You shall be innocent with Hashem your G-d* (*Devorim* 18:13), the Torah commands, and *Rashi* explains, *Go with Him in innocence and wait for Him, and do not investigate the future*. The *Shulchan Aruch* (179:1) rules that this prohibition includes *goralos,* casting lots to determine one.s course of action. But this rule has its exceptions.

**Exceptions**  
The *poseik* and *mekubal* Rav Yaakov Hillel, *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yerushalayim’s Ahavas Shalom, was asked about using the services of people who predict the future through various methods including the casting of *goralos* (*Shu”t Vayoshov Hayam* vol. 1:13). He begins his reply by discussing various *goralos* found in the *Tanach.* For example, after *Klal Yisroel* were defeated in the battle of the city of Ai, Yehoshua made a *goral* to discover who was responsible for the defeat and discovered that Achan had pillaged valuables from the spoil of Yericho instead of dedicating them to Hashem (*Yehoshua* 7).

In another incident, Shaul conducted a *goral* to find who had broken his oath against eating or drinking during a battle against the Plishtim. Shaul discovered that his own son, Yonosan, had eaten a fragment of honeycomb to refresh himself while pursuing the Plishtim and would have executed him had the people not pleaded, *Shall Yonosan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel? Heaven forefend: as Hashem lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground for he has worked with Hashem this day* (*I Shmuel* 14).

Another well-known *goral* was the one conducted by the sailors of Yonah’s ship to discover who was to blame for the storm that threatened to sink their ship. Rav Hillel points out that the first two of these cases have nothing in common with the*goral* that the Torah forbids since they were conducted with *ru’ach hakodesh* and *Urim veTumim.* As for Yonah’s *goral*, it was cast by non-Jews.

But what about the *goralos* performed by *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*? Faced with difficult or puzzling situations, they would often ask small children, *Pesok li pesukayich,* recite me the verses you have learnt, and then act upon what the children told them. For example, the *Gemara* (*Gittin* 68a) tells us how the blind Rav Sheshes escaped falling into a pit that wicked people had prepared for him by asking a child to recite a verse and acting in accordance to their answer: *Turn aside to your left or to your right* (*II Shmuel*2:21). The *Gemara* also tells us how Shmuel made decisions by opening a *sefer* and seeing whether the verse he came across was good or bad, while Rabi Yochanan made decisions by asking a child to recite the verses he had learnt (*Chullin* 95b).

Based on these and other sources, the *Remo* (*Yoreh De’ah* 179:4) rules that it is permitted to make decisions based on asking a child to recite verses he learnt. Of course, you might well ask, why is this different than the *goralos* that the Torah forbids? Regarding this the *Shach* explains: “It seems that according to the Rav [*Rama*] and the *poskim,* it is permissible to even act upon the result of a verse and rely upon it for the future, for it is considered a minor prophecy.” In other words, utilizing verses of the Torah is regarded as heavenly directed and similar to prophecy.

Earlier, we saw that Shmuel made decisions by opening a *sefer* to see what the *posuk* he came upon indicated. This may be the basis for the practice of conducting *goralos* based on paging through a *Chumash* or *Tanach.* One of the earliest *poskim* to discuss the practice of performing *goralos* with *seforim* is the *Maharikash* (Rav Yaakov Kastro of Egypt, died about 1610, cited by the *Chida’s Shiyurei Berocha*) who writes: “It seems to me that all agree one may open a *Sefer Torah*to see which verse comes up, for it [the Torah] is our life. So we find with Yeshayahu who took action after finding a *Sefer Torah* rolled to a certain verse, and such is the general custom.” “The *Chida* finds support for this practice from the following *Yalkut* (*Mishlei* 219): “*Have not I written for you excellent things in counsels and knowledge* (*Mishlei* 22:20). If you want to take counsel from the Torah, you may do so. Dovid said: When I wanted to take counsel from the Torah, I looked and took counsel as it says, *I will speak of your precepts, and perceive your ways* (*Tehillim* 119:15), and it says, *Through Your precepts I will gain understanding* (ibid 119:104).” In addition, the *Chida* cites a manuscript of Rav Eliyahu Hakohen (author of *Shevet Mussar*) that states: “I have a tradition from my rabbis. When they wanted to know of some matter and were doubtful whether to do it or not, they would take a *Chumash* or a *Tanach,* open it, see what verse they found at the top of the page, and act according to what it indicated. In this way, they took counsel with the Torah concerning how to take action in all their concerns.”

Rav Chaim Vital wrote an entire *sefer* about *goralos* appropriately named, *Goral Kodesh.*He writes that he authored this *sefer* due to the tendency of certain Jews to seek solutions to their problems through forbidden divinations and sorceries. “Therefore,” he writes, “I wrote this *sefer.* and reveal in it a secret, even though it would be appropriate not to reveal it as is known, so that people should know that there are a G-d and prophets in Yisroel and not go after sorcery.” The *Goral Kodesh* and a couple of other, *kabala-*based works are based not on paging through *seforim* but on mystical concepts. Why these types of *goralos* are permissible is beyond the scope of this article.

Most famous of all *goralos* is the *goral Hagra,* used extensively by a number of *gedolim*during the past hundred years. So well known are the stories involved with *Goral Hagra*, such as how Rav Aryeh Levin used it to identify twelve people who died in defense of Gush Etzion, that this article will only touch upon some of them. The *Chofetz Chaim* is known to have used the *Goral Hagra* a number of times. On one occasion he was unsure whether to set out on a fund-raising trip deep into Russia, when he performed the *goral* and came up with the answer, *I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again* (*Bereishis* 46:4). The *Chofetz Chaim* reportedly said the tradition came to him through Rav Chaim of Volozhi,. He taught it to a number of people including Rav Eliyahu Lopian. Intriguingly, when Rav Lopian was considering whether to leave Kelm for London and cast a *goral* to help him reach a decision, he came across the exact same verse the Chofetz Chaim found decades earlier . *I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again*.

The oldest written version of *Goral Hagra* is in an old manuscript in the British Museum titled, “The *Goral* of the *Gaon* of our Strength, Rabeinu Eliyahu.” The first printed *sefer* to mention the *Goral Hagra, Nifla’os Hashem* (printed in 1912), relates how a pious merchant of Aishishok, near Vilna, fell into a financial crisis after his liquor business was robbed. He was forced to sell his business. Even that was insufficient to cover his losses and he remained deep in debt. Local Jews were bothered by his misfortune for does the verse not state, *No evil shall happen to the righteous person. Mishlei* 12:21); was the liquor store owner less pious than he appeared?

To investigate the matter they used the *Goral Hagra,* which this *sefer* describes as follows: “There is a *goral* which people say the *Gra* invented. One opens a *sefer.* and from the next verse one sees from its meaning to understand the matter one wanted to ask.” Flipping from page to page, the good people of Aishishok became convinced that the liquor store owner’.s piety was not faked when they came across the verse, *Why did you not fear to speak of My servant, of Moshe* (*Bamidbar* 12:8).

Not all *gedolim* were happy with the idea of using the *Goral Hagra. Orchos Rabeinu Hakehilos Yaakov* reports that the Steipler Gaon never used the *Goral Hagra.* His son, Rav Chaim Kanievski, gave two reasons for his father’s reluctance*.* First, people nowadays do not know exactly how to do the *goral*, and secondly, one should not rely on*goralos* because of the Torah’s injunction, *You shall be innocent with Hashem your G-d.* It is reported that Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach also never used the *Goral Hagra.* In reply to people’s question that the *Gra* himself used it, he explained that besides great people having special *hanhaga,* guidance from above*,* also, we do not know clearly how to do the *goral* as there are different reports of how to do it. Even if one does know how to do it, he added, one needs special understanding to know what the *goral* is hinting at.

Reportedly, Rav Aharon Kotler never advised people to use the *Goral Hagra*, even though he used it himself when Rav Moshe Feinstein arranged an American visa for him and he was unsure whether to go to the U, or to *Eretz Yisroel*. His *goral* resulted with the verse,*Hashem said to Aharon: Go to meet Moshe in the desert* (*Shemos* 4:27)*.*

We have seen that the *Goral Hagra* is not something to be used lightly and that it is reserved for *gedolei Torah.* As for people who set up shop and conduct *goralos* for all potential customers, Rav Yaakov Hillel writes: “From all this we see that those who set themselves up to make *goralos* for the public are doing a prohibition even in this case of taking counsel according to which verse comes up in the Torah. People are only permitted to take counsel from the Torah privately and for a purpose, in a situation where one cannot decide the issue with one’s intellect or through the advice of a wise person.” And as for solving one’s problems, Rav Hillel concludes that nothing is better than one’s own *teffillos* and the *teffillos* and blessings of the true *tzaddikim* of our generation who are great in Torah and famed for their piety and good deeds, in addition to gaining Hashem’s favor by studying the Torah and fulfilling its *mitzvos.*